

THE KING OF SPAIN
and other poems
by **Maxwell Bodenheim**

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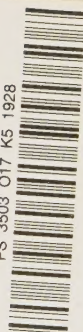
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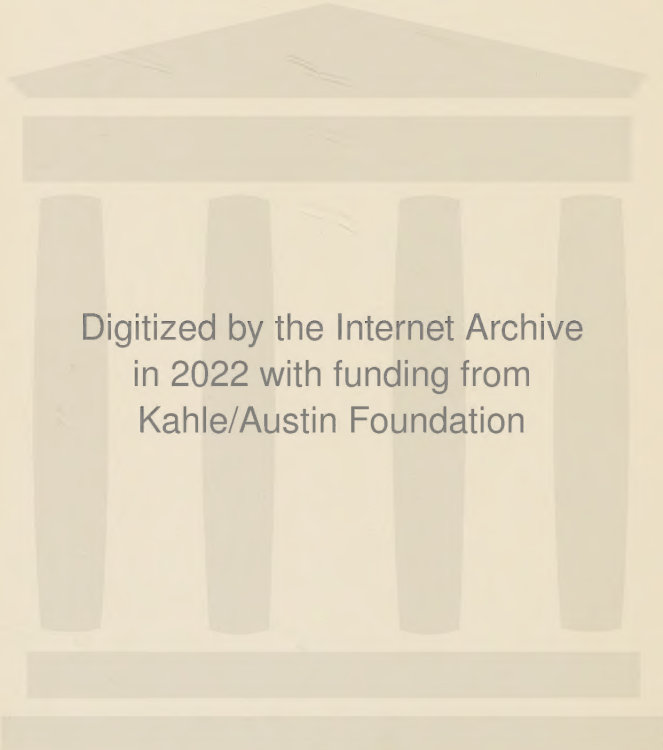
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THE KING OF SPAIN



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THE
KING OF SPAIN

A BOOK OF POEMS

By

MAXWELL
BODENHEIM

NEW YORK
BONI & LIVERIGHT
1928

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To
FEDYA AND MINNA
IN BEHALF OF THE KING

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

SINCE most of the critics reviewing "Returning to Emotion" objected to the "irrelevant footnote" in that volume, I have added several more footnotes, and headnotes, to the present book. An attitude of impish independence is often appropriate in response to those stodgily dignified ideas of "good taste" which dominate so many people. Amen.

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THE KING OF SPAIN

THE KING OF SPAIN

*If you would know why men dread nonchalance
When nonchalance leans back upon the chair
Of thought, and orders motives and renowns
To pass, disrobed and soiled, before its stare;
And why men are not fearful when the words
Of earthly spontaneity insist
Upon the same exposure, you must hear
The story of the King of Spain's black tryst.*

The King was middle-aged, and life had pressed
Its joking, deep, confused experiments
Upon his face, and had been half repelled
By shining, quickly said presentiments
Within his eyes and from his wary lips.
His face was dark, and like an endlessly
Half morbid tour-de-force, since he believed
That meditation and finesse should be
United in a lunge against decay.
To all his men and women he became
A masterful enigma, somehow raised
Above their customary love and blame.
He gave them boredom, pity, and contempt
In such a quick succession that they knelt
In fine bewilderment and then returned
Less confidently to their greed and stealth.
When men were dull sincere idealists,
His pleasantries pretended to agree,
And when their egotism snarled and leered
He fed them poison imperceptibly—

A poison wrought of promises and jibes
That made each malice indolent and slim,
Or caused its sword to strike impatiently
Against his heart forever taut and grim.
He laughed at women, and regarded them
As trumpets into which his vanity
Blew lyrics of completion and despair,
With intervals of bored profanity.
But when he met a woman with a mind
Of freshly seething images and hues,
He treated her with delicate reserve
As though she held incredible, bright news.

One night within his garden's trickery,
Where candid breezes twitted leaf and bloom
Impalpably and with erratic grace,
He looked upon the metal hint of doom.
The woman at his side was like a form
Of light and fragrance desperately wrought
Into a semblance of slow-breathing flesh,
With line and substance barely traced and caught.
Her black hair found a whiteness in the night,
Her eyes held earth and mysticism pressed
Into a lightly indecisive blue,
Her lips were whims whose words could not be
guessed—
Almost intangible, and straight, and small.
Her skin was like a scarf dropped in a fight
Between the night and starlight, and her young
Unmoving body bore it, close and slight.

Observing every part of her, the King
Felt for the first time like an armless knave
Who longed to touch her and regain his limbs
But feared that he would find himself a slave.
He said: "My cynicism dies before
The scarcely plausible suspended guise
With which your slender form convinces me
That you are not a twinkling wisp of lies!
Within the heart of any libertine
A ghostly lad resents his furtive death,
And now I ask you to award him one
Imaginative hour of depth and breadth.
For laughter, weeping, and the intellect,
Swept close within your form no longer seem
To be unfriendly and implacable,
But find your bosom in an even dream."

She looked upon the trees and at the sky
As though they were a distant and a near
Betrayal and denial of her mood,
Disturbing her to preludes made of fear.
She said: "Behind the shrubbery that lines
This walk six men are waiting for the end
Of your bombastic, oddly humble words,
And when I signal to them they will rend
The artifice and venom of your heart.
Your stilted poetry and wilted lust,
They come together in a compromise
And bring distinction to your self-disgust.
Oh, you would like to think that all you see

Of me is but a sleight-of-hand affair
Made by the moon—yes, both your arms and lips
Are weary of the flesh, and they would dare
The novelty of raping spirit-forms.
You sat beside my sister underneath
This tree, and swore that she was like a wraith
Of thought and feeling holding up a wreath
Of starlight—scarcely strong enough to hold
The heavy light—while she became the clue
That saved you from a gross reality.
She died because her memory of you
Grew tall and starved within the empty prose
Of lonely mornings and less artful men.
My hatred for you is the miracle
With which I keep her face intact, and when
My signal now brings on your death, perhaps
Her own defrauded lips will fall apart,
And she will stand here waiting to restore
The maimed and frosty gamester of your heart!”

The King, who had been listening to her
With envy and regret pressed by a smile
To one still wrestle on his face, replied
In his accustomed, softly balanced style:
“The moon-glow, shift of leaves, and odors like
The fainting consolation made by night
To heal innumerable wounds, they turned
Your sister’s body to an urgent, light
Retreat from lust, and jealousy, and fear.
Her sex was purified, frail, and unreal,

And when she leaned upon me I became
All perilously downcast, and could feel
Intense apologies for all the haste
And crudeness ever known to human touch.
But on the next day, when she stood within
The studied meanness of my court, with much
Inconsequential rouge upon her face,
With lips securely veiled and satisfied,
And all her speech unfruitful and demure,
I knew then that her heart and mind had lied.
You also were transfigured and aroused
Within this garden's verse of light and sound,
Until my words revived your hates and plans,
And pressed your feet once more upon the ground.
But you, unlike your sister, have a soul,
And you were not a magic accident
Born from the breath of night against your heart.
You will be forced to leave your small intent
And make your peace with moonlight on the trees.
Your plot was known to me, and yet I came
To watch the gamble of your wakened soul
With dark persuaders made of hate and blame."

Her pierced and insubstantial face revealed
Swift-moving shades of liking and despair,
Whose struggle seemed to rise into her hands
That rested on the blackness of her hair.
And then, without a word, she caught his arm
And walked beside him down the moon-striped
path,

While six men cursed and wondered as they crouched
And waited for the signal of her wrath.*

* This poem was first printed in *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*,
and received an honorable mention!

SONGS TO A WOMAN

I

YOU are like startled song-wings against my
heart
Which flutters like a harp-string wounded
By too much quivering music.
You cover me with a blue dream-robe
Whose silk ripples out like imaged water. . . .
And when, for a moment, you leave,
I am a black sky awaiting its moon.

II

IF I could be moon-light scattered out
Over the blowing dark blue hair
Of kneeling, flowing crystal breezes
Breathing a litany of pale odors,
If I could be moon-light scattered out
Over the whispers meeting in your heart,
The marriage of our souls would be
No more complete than now.

III

LIKE a delicately absentminded guest,
Your smile sometimes lingers after
Your lips are solemn.
And once I saw a tear in your eye
Playing hide-and-go-seek with some leaping, dimpled
memory.

These things, to me, are like scattered perfume
Tantalizing the weariness of my heart.

IV

THE struggle of a smile craving birth
Invades her little weeping faun's face,
And even makes her tear-drops leap. . . .
She smiles as only grief can smile:
A smile like ashes caught within
A tiny whirlwind of light;
When the light goes, the ashes drape her face
Till even her lips seem grey.

V

WAVE your veils to pallid gavottes,
Blow them on with dimly spiced laughs,
And catch them breathlessly against your breast:
You have prayed too long in your sinking temple—
Night has come, with her fumbling release,
Her moment in which you may play with sad
thoughts.
So, wave your veils to pallid gavottes,
Blow them on with dimly spiced laughs
And catch them breathlessly against your breast.

STREET

ROWS of exact, streaked faces,
Each afraid to be unlike the other,
Recalling the rows of people I have bowed to.
(O bare yellow houses, let me batter different shapes
into you
With cracked knuckles!)

Glass globes on signs and in shops, with a light not
their own,
Recalling the small souls that festoon the streets of
my remembrance.
(Oh, let me place you between large thumbs
And break you to showers of falling splinters and
sparks.)

HAPPINESS

THE moon, like the ash-colored wraith of a
candle-flame,
Hangs bewildered, in a gaudy, blowing
afternoon:
So does your little joy hide itself.

The crippled sunlight drags its huge orange limbs
Over a tiny, squatting hill:
So does your joy pass over me.

At the end of a red, capering afternoon
The dizzy trees bow slowly to the sun:
So do I salute your happiness.

SUFFERING

THE morning lowers its fire-veined back
And quivers beneath the edged feet of
winds:

So do you stoop to your agony.

The air brushes up the fibrous souls
Of flowers, and sprinkles them between
The flickering-sleeved arms of lime-trees:
So does your sorrow whirl you apart.

The brocade-robed night staggers against the wall of
the sky,
And fiercely sinks its woe-turbaned head:
So does your grief lean upon me.

THE CRUCIFIXION

HER body was flowing and close-woven—
A slippery, whispering curtain which could
not stop

Streams of dim gleams behind it.

One day with a long knife I cut a rent in the curtain:

I saw a soul nailed to a cross—

Slender, perfect-lipped, trying to laugh at its agony,

Counting its spattering blood-drops amusedly.

And somehow I could not find the sight dreadful.

THOUGHTS WHILE WALKING

A STEEL hush freezes the trees—
It is my mind stretched to stiff lace
And draped on high, wide thoughts.

My soul is a large sapless park,
And people walk on it, as they do on the park before
me.

They numb my levelness with dumb feet—
Yet I cannot even hate them.

THE STEAM-SHOVEL

THERE was an unsightly arm
And a cupped hand with three crusted
fingers.

The hand sank into earth and bulged with it:

Then swung aloft in sudden exaltation. . . .

And the seamy, blotched man beside me said:

"I've stood here for two hours watching that steam-
shovel—

Can't seem to get enough of it."

I stood for hours, but I did not see the shovel.

I saw the man in smirched blue

Jerking a rope at the precise moment

When the laden hand dipped over a freight car—

His strained wet face and his eyes pressed to specks.

I saw the knotted-up man at the engine,

His face dead and dented like old tin.

(Life to him is the opening and closing of levers,

And heavy sleep.)

When I walked away the two men were fixed
paintings

In the little art-gallery of my mind,

Where portraits are weighed well before ad-
mitted. . . .

The steam-shovel?—I had forgotten it.

THE CAMP-FOLLOWER*

WE spoke, the camp-follower and I.
About us was a cold, pungent odor—
Gun-powder, stale wine, wet earth, and
the smell of thousands of men.
She said it reminded her of the scent
In the house of prostitutes she had lived in.

About us were soldiers—hordes of scarlet women,
stupidly, smilingly giving up their bodies
To a putrid-lipped, chuckling lover—Death;
While their mistresses in tinsel whipped them
on. . . .

She spoke of a woman she had known in Odessa,
Owner of a huge band of girls,
Who had pocketed their earnings for years,
Only to be used, swindled, and killed by some noble-
man. . . .

She said she thought of this grinning woman
Whenever she saw an officer brought back from
battle, dead. . . .

I sat beside her and shivered once.

* This poem was affronted by an honorable mention in a War-Poem Contest sponsored by Harriet Monroe over ten years ago. The prize-winning poem was "Metal Checks," by Louise Driscoll.

CIRCUS

A CLOWN fell down—the poet did not laugh:
An elephant profaned a dance: a girl
Grinned in her lurid smugness on the backs
Of horses, while a tall and whiskered churl
Cracked whips to aid her: parrots swore at snakes:
Mules kicked above the sawdust: dumb giraffes
Were chased by monkeys: dogs rode baby-carts:
While men and women raised their child-like laughs,
But still the poet stared and made no sound
Until a man beside him, mean and jowled,
Remarked: “Now I’m a happy boy again”:
The poet slumped within his seat . . . and howled.

JAZZ-MUSIC*

I'VE got a south-wind's low-down heart,
I'm sneaking out like soft-shoed sin.
The moonlight's drowned my little soul,
The moon's a spilling glass of gin.

O honey, slide me
Right through the grasses
The night's untied me,
And all the masses
Of fear and envy,
They say: "Bye-bye, boy!"
O honey, when we,
Me and my sly boy,
Commence to foxtrot,
That night goes cra-azy!
Its moaning knocks hot
Against the hazy
Magnolia silence.
Just creamy madness,
The flowers lie dense,
And when the sadness
Of old night shakes him
To weird romancing,
Their perfume makes him
All drunk and dancing:

* This poem was rejected in one of *The Nation's* prize-contests, failing to receive even the customary honorable-mention with which such contests seek to insult my work. Literary and art contests of any kind are rather bad musical-comedies—with the singers on a strike!

The moon deceived me, hurt me so,
Just like a promise dead when dawn
Slunk up the hillside, mean and slow.
I cried all day 'cause it was go-one.
O honey, let me
Stay with the moonlight.
It ca-an't forget me—
I hope it's soon night;
I turned my shoulder
To singing pain, dear.
My legs grew bolder,
Fast with disdain, dear.
My body shouted
In every motion,
And how I flouted
The heavy notion
That day was real, dear:
Oh, all my heart-beats
Rose to a squeal, dear.
I left the cold streets
And found the hills, dear—
Just where the moonlight's
Warm pity spills, dear.
And where a tune fights
The fears of life, dear,
The great night made me
His leaping wife, dear,
And nothing stayed me!

The moon was tragic,
Yet thronged with lightness,

Just like a magic
Where grief and whiteness
Become so winsome
They melt together,
They cry: "Step in—come!
Sway like a feather!"

But now the daylight's made me still,
And all my heart's a splintered cup.
I lean against the window-sill.
No storm of music swings me up.

I've got the slow, black, orchid blu-ues:
I'm in the jungle, trapped and lo-one.
My fingers tap against one bruise,
The last place . . . where . . . the moon-
light . . . sho-one.

ADVICE TO A SWITCH-ENGINE

YOU poke your grimy snout
Into the flowing violence of night
And sidle down the track
As one who cares not where he goes.
Your smoke is bitter wine to-night
Who wearies of his roses;
The clattering indifference of your freight-cars
Charms away his weight of music.

O harshly dirty locomotive,
Panting with contented energy,
You are more fortunate than men.
They cannot steep themselves in motion,
Seeking nothing else.

MOTION

HER smile was like a breeze all trapped
Within a curving jail of light,
Yet stirring just enough to hug
Its past identity—clear, slight.

INTRUSION

SHE made a garbage-can for Pan,
Nymphs, seraphim, and fairy-wings.

She said: "The rattle of machines
Strikes past the heart where blindness sings."
Within an iron factory
She wove cheap flowers, silken strips:
Death pitied her too much and brought
A twisted lyric to her lips.

OLD SUBJECT

THIS rose-bush—spike and limpness cancelling
The famished, deeply brazen lie of red—
Remains immune to all the manias
And ravishings within a larger night.

Its petals, infinitely concentrated,
Glowing, withering,
With unerring speed,
Are far removed from loose
Rhapsodies bestowed by men—
Children in-ev-i-tab-ly playing with sleep—
Whose names remain in human halls of fame
For the applause of drowsy, docile mites.

Its perfume—Life goading itself
With a floating promise,
Half, unendurably elated,
And half, softly agonized—
Its perfume is remote
From all the men and women
Whose flouncing, imploring emotions
Use it to hide the dirt from which they came!

APOLOGY

To Babette Deutsch, who called my verse beautiful and delicately fantastic in nineteen-eighteen—rear-section, *Little Review*—and then mysteriously contradicted this verdict nine years later!

DIAGONAL, thrice-wounded, scornful thrusts
Of subtlety controlled his conscious voice,
And when child-brains in taverns laughed
at him,
He stopped and bowed—a renegade's clear choice.

One day he rested in a chirping glen.
A beetle crawled beside him on a rock
And piped: "Your poems are deliberate
And tenuous—you only seek to shock

Your enemies with frail dexterities!"
The poet stooped to gaze upon his foe
And asked: "When you climbed up upon this rock,
Tell me, were you spontaneous, mirthful, slow?"

FOUR LINES

BECAUSE a white outcast within his mind
And heart bestowed a dagger or a smile
On babbling laborers and scavengers,
They spat upon his life, and called it guile.

ANATHEMAS

BE nude: reveal your sweat
Blossoming to honest blotches
Sometimes: perform your functions
Over the gutter of a street
And ask the men and women
Who pass, to join your laughter
At the small, relieving ugliness.
Drop your hands on every seam
And niche of bodies, exposing
Slippery impediments
Where poems begin or end.
Slap the legs and buttocks of men,
Seeking only to confuse
Their shoddy, shrivelled dignity.

Oh, delicateness is invisible
And impulsive, far beyond
The covered, lying effigies
Of delicateness made by shrinking men!

EPITAPH FOR A POET*

THE stone that squats above his head—
Innocuous, revered, complete—
Should leave this rebel-poet's bed.
They threw so many—why repeat?

* Mr. H. L. Mencken would detest this little poem—an excellent testimonial of its worth,

SECOND EPITAPH

THEY said his work was passionless,
Because it failed to rant or croon,
Yet all their shallow, singing stress
Conceals one phrase—We die too soon.

THIRD EPITAPH

O H, do not give him stone—instead,
With pompous intonations, place
Upon his grave a loaf of bread
To keep amusement on his face.

NOTES ON A FACE

I

THIS face is not a mask, and yet it shows
Thought grown supernaturally coy
Between curved fallacies of light and shade.
This face is not a flower, yet it holds
Emotion so sportively tossing,
So tintured with the daring purities
Mistaken for exotic flimsiness,
That flowers find a friend within its flesh.

II

LOOK into her eyes
Hour after hour,
Never glancing to the right or left,
And at last you will see her soul—
An unobtrusive opulence
Of steady light below
The more susceptible, revised
Lights within her blackguard eyes.

III

O TACITURN, sheer vagabond
Living in her heart,
You have journeyed on too many roads
To voice a babbling love or hate
For what you touched and spied.

Dullness and necromancies
Trail out into a soft
Unimportance in your memory. . . .

All you have left is a trick
Picked up on some forgotten road—
The trick with which you turn,
Lolling, to a slow and fearless art,
Immune to all the shrinking haste of life.

METAPHYSICAL

CIRCLES—*straight lines*
Curled up in slumber.
Ferocity of angles—
Straight lines meeting in a pointed love
Whose tip juts out of sight.
Oblongs—straight lines of equal length
Crossing at four points
Beyond which they become invisible.

He said that life was mathematical,
Emotions being the errors
In spacing and computation.
Love became a mistake
In addition and multiplication
Corrected unexpectedly.
With each correction, efficiency
Grew greater, till at last
The pupil won his passing-grade
From Death, a passionless teacher.
“O the over-subtraction
Of hate,” he said, “so much larger
Than the true, numerical
Gap between two figures:
Only friendship prolonged
Drew near to accuracy,
Missed it by overlooking
Numbers at the bottom of each column.
But O,” he said, “the errors
Stop in poetry!

Love, and hate, and friendship,
No longer interfere
With calculations lightning-swift,
Involved, and orderly.
Analytical geometry
And Euclid solve the way
To experimental mathematics!" . . .
He stood a moment in the door:
A smile made glistening arcs upon his face.
"O Art," he cried, "you hold
An almost precise abstraction—
Experiment ascending
Between the known and metaphysical!"

DISCOVERY

O SOULS are not lugubrious,
Moody, whitely amazed:
Not weightless, and never calm.
Souls are laughters and smiles
Poorly translated by men.

LIFE

YOU dyed your hair pale green,
The color of a virgin's hate:
Set purple on your lips—
Decay and ripeness merged by fate.

You stained your face dark gray,
The tinge beneath a harlot's grin:
Your orange eyebrows held
The opulence which men call sin.

One arm and hand you made
Cerise—pink rising to a leer:
The other hand and arm
Light brown, the hue of washed-out fear.

You stained your breast pale blue,
The color of a poet's death:
Your legs and feet became
Cream-white, a maiden's begging breath.

Stern critics, laughing ones,
Observed you, walking down the street,
And cried: "She is grotesque,
Insanely trivial, replete

With gaudy posturings!"
Or said, while shouts and chortles broke:
"A strolling paint-shop's here—
Come, tell us, girlie, what's the joke?"

DEAR MINNA

(CREDO)

DEAR Minna, malice is the leprosy
Of hearts too small to cast an open spear
And yet too large in self-esteem to kneel
Before the dreaming threats of straighter hearts.
Yet, straighter hearts, besieged by wolves, and rats,
By mice, and nightingales with tunes of spite
And snubbing underneath the warbled love,
Must often feign this leprosy to save
Their bodies from extinction in a fight
For bread, and roof, and ragged covering.
One poison checks another, even though
The second is an imitation made
To baffle Machiavelli at his sport!
Fantastic, whimsical outcasts need the mask
Of rotted, greasy skin, and little face
Pock-marked and pimpled with vindictiveness,
To guard against the selfsame skin and head
Concealed beneath the virtuous, bluff guise
Of men who feed on noble self-deceits.
The mud-stained rogue is merciful beyond
His wish, for he can only bring escape
Or quick destruction to his enemy,
But priests with sympathetic lies to hide
The waddling flabbiness within their hearts:
And uncreative mountebanks, who blend
A pilfered erudition and a host
Of bright, sarcastic words to strike the man

Who rides a thunderbolt above their heads:
And hybrids, with acute and subtle minds,
And hearts that compromise with pigs and apes,
Who sneer at more defiant, naked men:
And sentimentalists whose claws, all smeared
With honey, seek to pose as babies' paws—
They harmonize to one, revengeful cry.
Down with the naked, pliant renegade
Whose laughter questions temples made of wind:
Whose weeping is to heal the wounds received
By nudeness, or to fling a melted curse
Upon the squirmings of hypocrisy:
Whose self-possession quickly delves below
The lazy spontaneities of men:
Whose heart revolts at walls and sanctities,
And sweeps to one glow, pity and contempt,
And curiosity, and . . . hopelessness.

BASEBALL GAME

I

Introduction

POETRY is Intellect
Sampling old chartreuse
Of emotion and rising,
Still quizzical and newly accurate,
But with a moderate dismay
As the wine awakens bits of heart-beats.
Poetry is happiness and grief,
Calmness and compassion,
Worried by unanswered thought
And huddling close to save themselves
From the dark, irreverent foe.
Another lunge of poetry
Reduces all the lust and abstinence
Of life to one superbly domineering
Chastizing and refinement
Of line and color called æstheticism.
And poetry is often
The trapped and scornful stranger
Within each breast—the unrelated soul
Lending to thought and emotion
A sense of being false and incomplete.
Catholic, and never standing still,
Poetry revises all the stark
Veracities within this baseball park,
Bestowing grace and final penetration

Upon the crude, unfinished
Tabulations of prose.

II

PANDEMONIUM

Within this pitcher's heart and brain
Changes when he lifts his arms,
As though a king he did not know
Had leapt from some remote but insecure
Cell within his being
And raised a pair of arms
No longer bone and muscle
In the chase of gold and praise.
This giant, scoffing, unexpected
Master held within the chests
Of baseball pitchers, poets weeping
On the graves of loves, railroad conductors,
Chorus-girls—we call him soul:
The name is empty and contains
Only the sound of recognition
Given to the contradicting
Sureness which improves and overawes
Our thoughts and feelings, at the times
When they are most exhausted and alarmed.
Three men are on the bases,
Prancing in an ache to rush ahead,
And the batter at the plate
Swings his club in one half-circle
From his shoulder midway to the ground—
Back and forth—while the club

Nods its yes to ease his watching strain.
He peers out at the pitcher
With the fine, almost impersonal
Scowl held by an athlete
Or a poet when finality
Slowly, slowly takes off its shroud.
The souls of these two men
Scan each other with a massive
Concentration of disdain.
Thought and emotion have become
Helpless accompaniments,
And only two spirits remain,
Deigning to experiment
With the drama that leaps
From the contact of accident
And physical control and skill.
The pitcher throws the ball
While his body shoots forward
In the paradox of insolent pleading.
The ball curves outward in the middle
Of its flight, as though it held
Existence of its own and could reveal
A jovial, impulsive change of mind.
The batter swings and cleaves the air.
The ball falls in the catcher's glove
With a loud sound like the grunt of triumph.
Strike One! The ball returns
To the pitcher, and his lowered arm
Holds it for a moment, with an amiable
Lull of pride and speculation.
Then his face grows tight beneath his soul.

He throws the ball again, and now
It flies in one straight line,
With unearthly, increasing speed.
The batter once more hits the air.
Strike Two! The umpire's voice
Becomes the sardonic boo
Of a hired, tired judge.
The scowl upon the batter's face
Shows every shade of worried ferocity,
While underneath his soul stares, calm and still.
Again the pitcher throws the ball.
This time its outward curve ascends
Above the batter's head. Ball One!
The batter shifts with rhythmical
Renewals of plotting and relief,
While the pitcher views him
With a morbid cogitation
Dressed in unconcern.
Again the ball darts out and drops
Almost past the batter's feet,
As though the earth had called some tiny slave.
Ball two! The batter's scowl
Remains but lessens to admit
The lighter poise of confidence,
And the pitcher surveys him
With chagrin and anger—
Twin playthings for his patient soul.
And then a spiritual certainty
Burns quickly through his sweat-soaked flesh.
He throws the ball: its flight curves out
In one, erratic, subtle dare

To the batter's eyes.
The batter swings—one fraction of an inch
Separates his frenzy
From the ball's implacable coyness.
Strike three!—the gamble of souls is over.

ADVICE TO A YOUNG LADY

BOCCACCIO once pilfered
Your wilting corsage of white violets,
 Needing a touch of shyness
To sterilize his ribaldry?
Tell him that indecency
Is always faint-hearted at bottom:
Ask him to leave your violets
In peace, lest they betray him
And change to weeping at midnight.
Don Juan once made you
A touch of cosmetics on the cheeks
Of his wheedling despair?
Treasure the whim you had
To induce a mountebank to stop
Counting the sores in his heart.
Rabelais once offered you
Dung for your cloistered garden?
Let his cart in through the gates.
Delicacy twitches, twinkles
Better when it loves its enemy.
Jesus Christ once came
In the midst of your pagan caracoles,
Pity and sternness squeezed
Into the straight gleam of his smile?
Tell him to leap beside you
Like a vainglorious boy,
Oh, tell him that austerity
Needs a dream of supple gaiety,
If only to wake with less of an ache
Hidden far below its measured breath.

THEY CALLED HIM INSANE *

This poem was returned by Mr. Burton Kascoe, Editor of *The Bookman*, together with a printed rejection-slip. Mr. Kascoe once amused himself by posing as the "sole defender" of my work.

THE summer air was like a child,
Oh, like a child drooping
After too much playfulness
Yet warm with invincible tingles
Of remaining, impish desires.
Alvin sprang down the city-street,
Down the pavement where avarice
Feigns prostration, where dirt
Endlessly forming, endlessly shovelled up,
Becomes the excrement thrown off
By every hurried dreamlessness
Known to human beings.
Naked save for his sandals,
Alvin danced on, and his skin
Was an anger translated into joy
By satin breathings of motion.
His buttocks and the center of his body,
Sinuously gleeful, flaunting themselves
In primitive revolvings,
Oh, they were lost and unflinching clarities,
Lost and trying to find their way
Out of the petty, bundled virulence—
Trousers and meanly suggestive gowns—
Of men and women shocked upon the street.

* Dedicated to John S. Sumner.

Alvin pointed to the middle bloom
Of his insurgent body
And asked passers-by to admire
The scream and whisper symbolized
In the soft economy of flesh. . . .
Women shrieked and fled into doorways—
Browbeaten and underhanded longings
Fleeing to the sanctuary
Of an imagined terror.
Women gazed with spleen and surprise
Writhing in a well-trained act
Within the censored artifice of hearts.
Women looked with derision and hunger
Deadlocked upon their faces.
Men turned their eyes with a surly envy.
Men guffawed and brought relief
To the bawdy cautions in their breasts.
Men strode forward with fists
Clenched in a lying, cancerous
Defence of their lacquered frustrations.
Yes, beat down the body of Alvin Tor.
Wrench the blood from his naked affirmations.
Let your venom drink itself to sleep.
Then drape his limp form in a rain-coat—
Final touch of triumphant blasphemy.

SONNET TO HELEN

BETWEEN a sprite and murderer of pain,
So blithely flimsy with the whimsies made
By blunders tickling your reluctant brain
And yet so scarred, so penitent and staid,
The flitting, pale enigma of your smile
Would make an angel banter with his wings,
Would make a devil lose his phantom bile
And waltz with daffodils and tall green things.

Oh, you are never brutal, never mild.
Your heart-beats swing beneath the gleaming breath
Of your surprised, frail-haired, tiptoeing soul
Idling like some inconsequential child,
And when you find the impishness of death
It will be but a slightly shifting rôle.

TWO SALVATION-ARMY WOMEN*

“**A**RE you wa-a-ashed, are you wa-a-ashed, are
you wa-a-ashed in the blood of the
la-a-mb?”—

O Christianity,
Steeped in the blood of ten million men
Yet singing, singing of weird, blanched sacrifices,
Of peace beyond regrets and jealousies—
The steady lambent resonance
Of bell on bell multiplied
Within a childlike Sunday of the heart—
Of trusting handshakes overawing lust,
And friendship innocent
As the never-failing tryst
Of skies and orchards when the wind dies down:
O Christianity,
Pygmies spit upon you,
Shallow children make you
A grave that waits for restless thought,
Evil men sit in your churches,
Seek relief for wizened, fearful spirits.
Christianity, you need
A half sardonic, half compassionate
Poem ripped from a peering forbearance
More real than that which kneels within your bible!

Salvation-Army girl,
Your face is a pansy frightened into white,

* Let us not stand two feet away from the huge target and
hurl boulders at it, lest we resemble Mr. H. L. Mencken.

So lightly curled around the edges,
So precisely separated
Into the petals of smiles,
That hallelujahs leaping from it
Seem the prank of some ventriloquist!
Why does life forever
Fasten incongruities
On flowers real or symbolized?
Cut asters in a stained-glass bowl,
Shorn violets pinned to a bosom,
Clipped hyacinths within a hearse,
They are no more forlorn and out of place
Than your pansy-like head
In the doleful midst of hymns and roll-calls. . . .

Salvation-Army woman,
You are fat and middle-aged—
Adjectives describing
The false end of a story
That continues in your eyes and mouth
And in the movements of your hands.
Your eyes are poisoned youth—
The light within them avoids
Death by the fraction of an inch!
Your lips are sensual moans
Visible beneath the pretext
Of your singing love for Christ.
Your strong hands stroke the air
And in a dream they find
The missing texture of flesh . . .
Rattle your tambourine.

Shout: "Glo-o-ory be-e to Go-o-od!"
Beg for coins and conversions.
Cowards have but two choices—
Naked pleasure beneath a screen of lies,
Or self-denial rising to madness
And crying, swinging, twisting
Into every intense
Trick of imagined escape.

JOHN MILJUS DIES*

SPRING came on this morning
With blackbottom, Charleston, and tango
steps:

Came not in venturings of pale green
Paging the stray informalities of breezes,
But leapt down the city block
With gaieties rehearsed, sophisticated,
So like a boy emerging from a night-club
And wearily remembering his youth.
John Miljus slaved in the hole
Where pain and sweat leave secret epitaphs
Upon the concrete and iron foundation
Of a building forty storeys high.
John Miljus swung his pick and shovel
Doggedly, like a beast
Chained to a dream of submission
And yet rebelling against it.
The anger of a soul
Met the fumes of bootleg whiskey
In his breast and made a sickness
Whimpering too much to be sullen,
Fumbling too much to be hatred.
Oh, what did spring mean to John Miljus
But people leaning over a railing
Fifty feet above him,
Watching him like vexing, idle blanks;

This poem did not receive an honorable mention in any of the Poetry Prize Contests staged in this country. Why? Because the poem remained in the desk of its author!

Straining of muscles in a game
Too commonplace to be an ordeal,
An old, old game where weak imaginations
Seek the heaving strength of arms and legs.
Afterwards five drinks of alcohol
Spending their crude, tense sneer
To bring him visions of tricky power;
A girl, dumb, faintly dreaming,
To chase away the cowering of his flesh;
An older woman lending him
Her sticky, well-used lips
To veil her itching for his pocketbook.
Oh, John Miljus, you are caught
Between cynical and hopeful men
Who care to use you only
To bolster up their bogus wisdoms.
Spit in their faces and resume
Your pitiless, profane futility. . . .
John Miljus in his rubber boots
And overalls so like the color
And texture of rancid despair,
Slaved within the spring morning.
A steam-crane lifting an iron girder
Broke—the wanton missile
Made a joke of his body,
Dropped upon him and stopped
His life-breath in the shadow of a second,
Snapped his breast and head
And wrapped them in the tenderness of mud.
Men ran toward him, clustered around him.

Hundreds of faces no longer casual
Peered down from the railing fifty feet above.
Yes, John Miljus, you are important now.
Now they will sprinkle your body
With moistures wrung from sentimental fear,
John Miljus.

MOONLIGHT

O H, like a marble stand
Where ogres raise their hand
Above a garden's night,
Harmless and stiffly turned
With leers intense and spurned
Against the old moonlight,
The unhurt, heavy threats of sex reside
Among the lighter blooms and shifts of pride
That grow within the deep and less discerned
Emotions curved within your heart's command.

John 10/02

